

THE STATUS OF READING HABIT AND INTERESTS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA

P.H.A.S Abeyrathna¹ and A.N. Zainab²

¹ Zonal Education Office, Gampala, Sri Lanka

² MLIS Programme, Faculty of Computer Science & Information Technology,
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

e-mail: ¹ oanomaaberathna@hotmail.com; ² zainab@um.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Explores the leisure reading habits and interest among 300 secondary school students from 10 schools in Sri Lanka. The study also observes the students attitude towards reading, their use of the school library and knowledge of how the school library are organised for locating needed materials. The problems students face in obtaining reading materials is also identified. The study uses a structured questionnaire as the survey instrument. The findings generally indicate that the students read regularly outside school hours. This reading however, is mainly confined to textbooks and mainly carried out for the purpose of acquiring knowledge or for study. Consequently, the library is used mainly to study or do homework rather than to borrow items to read at leisure. Most students indicate positive attitude towards the library for providing them with the facility to carry out their study or meet friends, but hardly use the services the library provides. Most express dissatisfaction with their library's collection.

Keywords: Leisure reading; Reading interests; Secondary school students; Sri Lanka; School libraries; Habit of reading.

INTRODUCTION

Why is reading important? Reyhene (1998) observed that when children read for pleasure, they involuntarily and unconsciously improve their language skills. Bignold (2003) indicated that the habit of reading improved children's reading skills. Hence, the issue of reading whether it is for learning or leisure is important since it helps broaden young people's experiences and knowledge (Green, 2002).

Reading Habits and Interests

The activity of reading is regarded as a habit when it is repeatedly carried out. In measurable terms reading habits is often considered in terms of the amount of materials being read, the frequency of reading as well as the average time spent on

reading (Wagner, 2002), and this habit can be cultivated (Wijesuriya, 1995). Reading interests often refer to the selection of subject matter or preference for a genre of literature being read (Rudman, 1957). It is therefore often equated that an individual has developed a reading habit and interests when such activity is repeatedly carried out voluntarily for leisure. Krashen (1996) believed that this habit and interests could be nurtured at an early age. There would naturally be differences in interests between individuals of different age, gender and greatly influenced by internal factors such as the home, motivation and attitude as well as external factors such as peers, schools, teachers, and the library facilities available to the individuals.

There have been attempts to categorise readers. Beers (1996) categorized 7th grade students into 3 groups. The "dormant readers" were those who liked to read and considered themselves readers but did not take the time to read regularly or update their knowledge. They were not negative to reading but gave priority to other activities such as sports, social life and school work. They would read during convenient times such as during school breaks or after completion of major projects. The second and third groups were the non-committed and unmotivated readers. Those in these two groups have negative attitude towards reading and did not like to read. The non-committed readers were open to suggestion of reading in the future and have positive attitudes towards other readers. The unmotivated readers were not open to the suggestion of future reading and were negative towards people who do read. In a more recent study, Bullent (2002) categorised reading levels of 108 children between the ages of 11 and 12 into four groups; the heavy readers (reading 24 or more books per year or 2 books per month); the moderate readers (reading 7-23 books per year or 1 book per month); rare readers (reading 1-6 books per month (1 book every 2 month) and the non readers. The last two groups form a big percentage of children between the ages of 9 to 10, which indicated that the reading habit have not been well developed.

Gender Differences in Reading

A number of studies indicated that a higher percentage of girls indulge in leisure reading than boys (Zainab, 1977; Chai, 1996; Abilock, 2002; World book day survey, 2002). Studies have also indicated gender differences in reading preferences. Moffit (1992) and Simpson (1998) found that boys preferred adventure and sports stories, while girls enjoyed animal stories and stories about teenage problems. Shelly (1999) found that the 6th to 8th grade children have stronger preference for humour and horror stories, followed by mysteries, historical fiction, adventure and science fiction. The girls however, preferred romance, friendship, animal stories as well as historical fiction, while boys preferred sports and science fiction. Abilock (2002)

found that the girls within his sample preferred to read books both about males and females, while the boys would choose fiction about males. This was also found by Demise (2001), where in the junior high years, boys as a group preferred books with predominant male characters and action oriented. Girls however preferred romances. This differences in reading preferences between boys and girls continued into late childhood and adolescence.

Teachers, School Libraries / Librarians and Reading

Studies have indicated that teachers and teacher librarians can help to improve reading skills and improve attitude towards reading. Wiesendanger (1994) and Valari (1995) indicated that a period of sustained silent reading in class could help develop positive attitude towards reading in schools. Quillan (1997) found after examining evidence from a number of studies on the effect of incentives on reading in school library programmes among secondary school students that reading activities increased when reading activities were used but could not ascertain whether there was changes in attitudes or habits. Also, Cole (1999) suggested that teachers who are motivated to discover their students' literacy personalities could help enhance intrinsic motivation to read among their students. Cole suggested that teacher librarians could offer students with a rich variety of books on various topics, levels and genre to capture students' interests. Gillet and Temple (1994) as well as Fong (1997) proposed that teacher librarians should provide book in accordance to the four stages of reading development; building fluency, reading for pleasure, reading to learn and mature reading. Gniewek (1998) proposed that empowering the classroom library collection, which could be replenished from the main library collection, encourages reading. A study carried out in Thailand (Somsong, 1999) highlighted the roles of libraries, librarians and library programmes in helping to stimulate and develop reading interests. A number of studies have indicated that children in schools with libraries and librarians read more than children with school libraries with no staff (Lance, 1994; Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennell, 2000)

Furthermore, a study by Buckingham (2002) on reading and literacy competencies in secondary schools in Manchester found that promotion of reading can develop student's reading habits for both recreational and educational reading. The study also illustrated the role of the teachers, teacher librarians and parents in promoting reading and literacy. Whelan (2004) describe the results of a Ohio survey of over 13,000 students from grades 3 to 2 who believed that their school libraries have helped them become better learners by providing them resources for their research assignments and helped them do their homework better. The students especially appreciate their library's role in IT instructions, providing information literacy skills,

how to search the Internet, evaluating websites, using power points, words, excel and other software.

Reading and the Home

There is only so much that the teachers and school librarians can do in schools to promote reading. Children's home could help reinforce children's reading habit and interest (Cole, 1999). As parents are the child's first teacher, they serve as role models for their children and this equally applies to interest in reading either for knowledge or for pleasure. De Medina (1976) in Brazil who studied 50 families found that reading occurred when there was an allocated place to carry out this activity in the home, the purchase of books by adults, and the presence in the home of at least one adult who reads frequently. Other studies have indicated that the home do influence reading among children. Kather's (1996) study indicated that fathers who were involved in school activities have children who were more likely to participate in extra curricular activities or have children performing well on reading score tests (Goldenberg, 1992). Ellen (1994) found that home environment (such as being read to as a child, public library use, receiving books as gifts, large personal and parental book collection, subscriptions to magazines) did influence 9th grade students' attitude towards reading. The 11-15 year olds in Marrie's (2002) sample indicated having positive memories of early literacy experiences at home. Another study carried out by the National Assessment of Educational Program' (2002) found a relationship between parental education level and 12 grader's reading. Demise (2001) found that parents who were readers did encouraged reading for leisure among their children. This influence was reduced, as children grew older. Blackwood (1991) found that college students did read for leisure and parental encouragement, occupation and educational status had no significant effect on students' leisure reading habits. What the home lacks, the school or public library could compensate.

Attitude Towards Leisure Reading

Perhaps the home influence is also manifested in the formation of children's attitude towards reading. As early as 1994, Gillet pointed out the influence of both attitude and motivation on reading. Children with a positive attitude towards reading would pick up a book recommended by their parents, teachers and friends. Chai (1996) indicated that there is a need for teacher librarians to renew their effort on instructing and guiding older children in the use of the school library in order to revive and foster positive attitude towards using the library for leisure reading. Pembroke (1997) found that intervention technique such as using a theme of immense interest in a reading programme especially designed for fifth grade male students whose reading grade was above average but whose voluntary reading is

non-existent or limited did help to change their attitude towards voluntary reading. This was similarly indicated by a recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)(2002), which found that children's deprived background might not be a dominant predictor if children's have positive attitude and have very high interests in reading. A Malaysian study of 6th form students (Lim, 1974) found that the most important motivating factor was self or personal interests and this favourable attitude was well formulated among the girls and those in the Arts stream.

In Sri Lanka, the National Library and Documentation Service Board (NLDB) carried out a survey in 2002 and found the following situations; reading habits of students was poor, the condition of the school libraries was not encouraging as book collections were old and most students read "light" materials such as magazines, novels, comic books and newspapers. Gunasekara (2002) studied reading problems in Sri Lankan secondary schools and found three major hindrances to the promotion of reading habits. These include; preference to chat and listen to the radio; insufficient reading resources in school libraries to be borrowed and preference for television viewing. Most reading was done mainly for examination purposes. The current study explores similar issues with regard to reading interests and habit and hopes to supplement the above findings.

THE SAMPLE STUDY

This study aims to identify reading habits and interests of secondary school students and also examine possible factors that might be related to it. The instrument for investigation is a questionnaire. The sample comprises 300 boys and girls from 10 secondary schools (1AB and 1C) in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The students were in grades 12 and 13 in both the Arts and Science streams. The respondents comprised 49% (147) males and 51%(153) females. The questionnaire was structured to incorporate the following variables that have been identified as possible predictors of reading interests and habit (Figure 1).

In this framework, the student's reading interests and habits was measured in terms of the type materials read, the subject as well as stories the students prefer to read, and the amount of time allocated for leisure reading. Surrounding the students are the variables identified from literature, which might be related to their acquired habits and interests in reading for leisure.

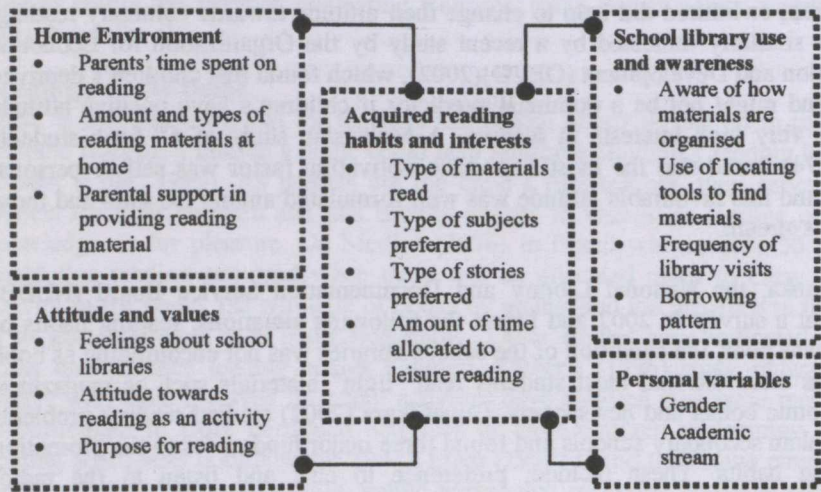


Figure 1: Possible Variables Related to Reading Interests and Habits

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Acquired Habit of Reading

The habit of reading was measured in terms of time spent on reading. The majority of students (53%) indicated reading between 1 to 2 hours every day (Table 1). Only 4% indicated never reading and 11% indicated spending more than 3 hours per day reading. The rest (32%) spent less than 1 hour each day reading. Over 80% of students read the newspapers and 18% indicated never reading them.

Table 1: Frequency of Reading by Types of Material (n=300)

Types	Textbooks		Fiction		Non-fiction		Magazines		Newspapers	
Amount	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Never read	18	6.0	81	27.0	51	17.0	28	9.3	53	17.7
< 1 day per week	12	4.0	81	27.0	93	31.0	65	21.6	75	25.0
1-2 days per week	33	11.0	108	36.0	126	42.0	83	27.7	61	20.3
3-4 days per week	57	19.0	21	7.0	21	7.0	68	22.7	58	19.3
Everyday	60	60.0	9	3.0	9	3.0	56	18.7	53	17.7

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Most of student's time each week was taken up by reading textbooks. The rest of their leisure time was taken up by reading lighter materials such as newspapers and magazines. This corroborated the findings by Gunasekara (2002) that reading is carried out for learning and examination purposes in his Sri Lankan study. Terry (1996) also found that high school students mainly read for utilitarian purposes such as reading mainly for the purpose of achieving success in school and least for their own enjoyment. Herald (1997) revealed that teenagers in a survey read newspapers and the sports sections were the most popular sections read.

Acquired Interest in Reading

The interest in reading in this study manifests in the types of materials students enjoy to read. For non-fiction reading, categorized by broad disciplines and based on the number of ticks received by each discipline, students indicated more preference for books on religion and philosophy (90%). This was followed by science and technology (21%), sports (19%) and politics (15%). The least popular were books dealing with social science issues and international affairs. Books on religion and philosophy ranked on top as the first choice (68%), science and technology as the highest 2nd choice and sports and games as the highest third choice. There was no significant difference in reading preferences of students by gender or academic streams (arts and sciences). Table 2 indicates a high preference for humorous stories (73%), followed by crime and detectives (38%), historical stories (34%), love and romances (32%). Humour, crime and detective stories in books and magazines are much preferred by students in this sample. Krashen (1996) noted that humour stories were one of the most popular types of materials read by lower grade students. Shelly (1999) also found a strong preference for humour and horror stories among 6th to 8th grade students.

Table 2: Type of Genre Enjoyed by Students (n=300)

Types of Stories: Books	%	Types of articles: Magazines	%	Types of sections: Newspapers	%
Humour	73.0	Humour	83.4	Local news	53.6
Crime and detective	38.4	Crime and detective	69.8	Foreign news	46.6
Historical	34.0	Sports	52.7	TV program	44.6
Love /romances	32.4	Health	48.7	Sports	36.3
Miscellaneous	30.3	Love/romances	47.9	Special Features	29.3
Adventure	28.0	Science/Technology	46.2	Cartoons	28.6
Science	24.0	Adventure	43.6	Fashion	26.6
Biographies	18.2	Literature	34.8	Advertisement	16.3
War	17.3	Fashion	21.9	War	10.0
		Entertainment	18.8	Editorials	9.0

Home Environment

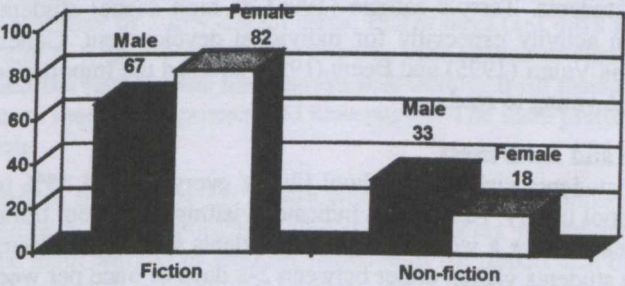
The students' reading times was significantly related to the number of hours both their parents spent on reading (mothers, $r^2=152.772$, $df=3$, $p<0.01$; fathers, $r^2=10.584$, $df=3$, $p<0.05$). Even though about half of the parents indicated by their children as those who "never reads" or spent less than 1 hour per day reading, the parents who did read, seemed to have children who were readers of between 1 to 2 hours per day. The number of students who were in the latter category was about 53%. Those student whose parents read, also indicated reading more non-text materials (non-fiction, magazines and newspapers). There was also a significant relationship between the hours spent on reading to availability of reading materials at home. About 36% of students claimed that there was 1 to 50 books in their homes and 61% indicated there were 50 or more books in their homes. Only 3% indicated their homes did not hold books. Besides books, the students' homes also made available magazines and newspapers. Only 8 to 9% of the 300 respondents indicated that their homes did not hold any magazines or newspapers. About 84% to 85% of the homes held two or more magazines and newspapers. The family members contributed to about 38% of student's reading material, which comprised gifts, purchases or books owned by family members. The rest of student's reading materials came from the school library (20%) and especially friends (42%). The results of the current study do indicate the positive influence parents have on their children's reading habits.

Gender and Academic Stream Versus Reading Preferences

In this study, girls (51%) read more than boys (49%) (Figure 2). However, both boys and girls read more fiction than non-fiction for leisure. Also, the habit of reading fiction, non-fiction and magazines was not related to gender. The results however showed that more female than male students read textbooks regularly and more males read newspapers than females. Students academic stream (arts and sciences) was also not related to the reading of textbooks, non-fiction and newspapers. There was however, a relationship between academic streams and the habit of reading fiction and magazines. Arts students read more fiction and magazines regularly compared to students in the science stream. The findings differ from the studies conducted among boys and girls in the West. Zainab (1977) found that students between the ages of 11-6 in a Cardiff school in Wales showed gender differences in reading interests. Boys read more non-fiction than girls and the fiction read for leisure showed a predominance of light literature, such as romances and horror stories books popularized by the mass media. The World Book Day study (2002) however indicated that girls tended to spend more hours on reading for enjoyment

than boys. Girls aged between 11 and 16 were more likely to read a book recommended by their friends.

Figure 2: Reading of Fictions and Non-fiction by Gender (n=300)



Purpose, Motivation and Attitudes Towards Reading

Students were asked how they rate the impact of reading upon themselves. This would indicate whether the students were aware of the benefits that reading provide. The majority of students (42%) indicated they read for general knowledge, for examination (32%) and for leisure (16%). This may be the reason why figures for types of books most read were textbooks. There was no gender difference in the purpose of reading.

There was a difference between reading purpose and academic streams. About 45% of respondents from the arts stream compared to 40% from the science stream indicated reading for general knowledge. Less arts students (24%) compared to science students (27%) read for their school examinations. More science students read for leisure and enjoyment. The results showed that reading for recreation was low in priority for Sri Lankan students. Female students appeared to have a more positive attitude towards reading for individual development and enjoyment. Both however, value reading because it ensures academic success in school (Table 3).

Table 3: Attitude Towards Reading

Attitude Dimensions	Count	%
I would rather read a book than do most anything else	125	41.4
Reading is all right as means of learning	103	34.6
I only read when something really interests me	54	18.0
I don't care much for reading	12	4.0
Reading is a waste of time and it is all right for lazy people	6	2.0

Students in the sample were fully aware of the importance of reading and did not consider it a waste of time. The respondents generally agreed that reading improved their general knowledge. A previous Malaysian study by Lim (1974) found similarly, that the arts students have a more favourable attitude towards reading than the science students. Terry's sample (1996) of high school students also valued reading as an activity especially for individual development. Generally, previous studies such as Valari (1995) and Beers (1996) stressed the importance of attitude in motivating the young to read.

Library Use and Awareness

Only 4% of students visited the school library everyday and 35% indicated never using the school library. About 32% indicated visiting the school library regularly 2-3 days a week or once a week. More male students visited the library every day but more female students visited either between 2-3 days or once per week. Most of the students visited the school library for learning purposes, either to look for reference materials (38%) or do their homework (28%). Only 27% used the library to read magazines and newspapers. Other purposes the students indicated include, to borrow books (23%) and to rest or chat with friends (13%). A small percentage of the students used the school library to borrow books (2-3 books or 1 book per week). Slightly more than half (57%) did not borrow anything from the school library. Nearly all students found the library a good place to study. More females (34%) than male (15.6%) borrowed books.

In order to locate reading materials, knowledge of how the material in the library was organized or knowing to use the catalogue to find materials would be an advantage. Very few students indicated understanding the library's classification scheme (26.6%) and more than half (56%) reported they did not know. About 62% indicated not receiving any kind of instruction on how to use the library catalogue. Only 27% indicated receiving some instructions. As such, it is not surprising that over 30% of students have used the library catalogue. The rest indicated asking the librarian (26%) when looking for materials or "browse the shelves" (26%). This lack of user library instruction may be the main reason why the majority of students were not aware of how materials are arranged in their libraries or how to locate needed materials. Smith (2001) studied 600 Texas school libraries found that over 10% more students in schools with librarians met the minimum expectations on the Statewide standardized test (TAAS) for reading. Pembroke (1997) found that there were improvements in involuntary reading when the library used the intervention techniques of using thematic reading programmes especially designed for those whose reading grade was above average but whose voluntary reading was non-existent or limited.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the secondary students in the sample ($n=300$) were readers. Most read books for general knowledge and examination requirements. The majority read their textbooks everyday or 3 to 4 days a week. Fewer days (1-2 days per week) are spent reading fiction, which were read for leisure. Girls tended to read more fiction than the boys and the reverse was the case for non-fiction. Both males and females showed interests in reading magazines and newspapers. The male preferred books in sports and science.

The main hindrances for reading for leisure were the excessive concern of students with reading textbook for examination purposes. Students regard the pursuit of knowledge as the main purpose of reading, unaware of the importance of reading for pleasure and enjoyment. It was felt that teachers could help in inculcating the habit by giving students the experience of reading under guidance, such as helping students to select materials based on students interests. The school librarians could also help by providing a richer collection of reading materials for students to choose from. In the current study, students indicated not very happy with the library collection especially for leisure reading. There was a discrepancy between what was available and what was actually desired. A suggested approach was to periodically borrow thematic book collections from the public library for teaching and reading needs. This approach would help the financially less able students to obtain a wider selection of reading materials.

Perhaps the best assurance of possible success in ensuring teacher librarian's involvement in inculcating reading habit and interest is in the training of teacher librarians in the skills of managing the school libraries. A suggested strategy is providing in-service training for teachers who are entrusted with library work so that they themselves becomes proficient in the skills of organising materials in the library and could effectively transfer this knowledge to both fellow teachers and students. Another suggested approach is the initiation of a nation-wide reading programme, workshops and seminars, which the Sri Lanka National Library could host. This study has brought to the surface the general reading status of Sri Lankan secondary school students and highlight the problems, which the students face in acquiring suitable books to read for leisure.

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